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| 13 July 2021 | | ITEM: 11 |
| Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee | | |
| Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Social Care | | |
| Wards and communities affected: All | Key Decision: N/A | |
| Report of: Michele Lucas, Assistant Director, Education & Skills Janet Simon, Interim Assistant Director, Children's Social Care | | |
| Accountable Assistant Director: Michele Lucas, Education & Skills & Janet Simon, Children's Social Care | | |
| Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director for Children's Services | | |
| This report is Public | | |

Executive Summary

This report provides a summary of the work that has taken place with our vulnerable children and young people during the global pandemic. With the national lockdowns in place, children's services have worked in partnership with our schools to ensure that children are receiving an educational offer whilst we maintain our strong safeguarding support to schools, children and families.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 Children's O&S to note the support provided to vulnerable children and young people over the past year.**
- 1.2 Children's O&S to consider other areas of support going forward as we look to the recovery phase from Covid-19.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1** This report informs Children's Overview and Scrutiny on the response by children's services in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact on children and young people, with our looked after children and those who have special educational needs and disabilities.
As a consequence of the Central Government response to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was announced in March 2020 that all schools were to close for pupils except those identified as vulnerable, which included children with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and those who had a social

worker. This instruction was followed by all schools across Thurrock. Plans were implemented to ensure those children not attending school received a virtual offer from schools delivered through a range of approaches including physical work materials and online learning.

The global pandemic meant the LA had to mobilise a new IT solution for all staff, thus ensuring we could provide support to our local communities. During this time, the Local Authority has further embedded its strong partnership ethos with a range of stakeholders including; schools and colleges, police, Public Health and Local Health services, to ensure that all children have received an appropriate educational offer and that the individual needs of the most vulnerable have been recognised and supported.

3. Key Areas of Support

3.1 Communication with schools

Immediately following the announcement of the lockdown, there has been regular updates of information from the Director of Children's Services and the Director of Public Health to all schools informing them of the key information and advice in relation to the pandemic arrangements. In addition to information sent directly to schools, there has been a weekly forum with the Director and Assistant Directors of Children's Services for the Chief Executives of the Academy Trusts and Chairs of the Primary and Secondary Headteachers Associations to facilitate a regular opportunity to share information, raise concerns, problem solve arising issues with all schools and colleges.

This forum has been well received by schools and has resulted in positive feedback from Headteachers as it has led to clear information being delivered and issues resolved, thus enabling an effective education service to be delivered to children and young people in Thurrock.

3.2 Monitoring of Access to Education

The Local Authority undertook a data survey to schools during lockdown to identify the support that was being provided to vulnerable pupils. This survey was developed in consultation with representative Headteachers and senior staff in Education and Social Care from Children's Services. The survey went out to all schools for schools to identify all individual pupils identified as vulnerable under the DfE criteria; fortnightly information on what service they were receiving; whether they were in school; regularity of contact with parents; information on resources and access to digital learning; access to the support in relation to their EHCP; details of pupil risk assessment carried out by schools; narrative information on pupils including those added in addition to the DfE list and a RAG rating for all of these pupils so those requiring further intervention could be identified.

This information was circulated to Social Care staff to ensure that there was a cross checking with the individual risk assessment carried out by social workers for all children identified as having a social worker contact. The information received was also reviewed by Education staff to identify any cases of concern, where further consultation with schools were then carried out in relation to the support in place for pupils during the lockdown. Where pupils were identified as requiring to be in school as their needs were not being met appropriately at home, this was followed up by social workers supporting these families and by education staff for pupils with EHC plans.

The above information was further supported through discussions with the DfE in relation to any schools identified as having lower numbers of pupils attending school during the lockdown from the national return that schools sent in during this time for all pupils. This led to further discussions with schools where necessary to ensure appropriate attendance was in place.

3.3 Special School Attendance

The two Special Schools were in regular consultation with the Local Authority regarding the attendance of pupils and the offer to all pupils during the lockdown. The schools devised an appropriate offer based on the needs and complexity of issues for these pupils.

In Treetops School, an offer was put in place for those pupils with the most complex needs to access school directly, utilising appropriate social distancing arrangements to reduce contact between groups. Pupils not attending Treetops School at this time were supported through virtual learning, work packs, regular parent contact and home visits where necessary. A clear record of work and access to learning was kept by the school with appropriate actions by staff where needed to increase the virtual engagement or bring the child into school.

In Beacon Hill Academy, due to the highly complex needs of pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Needs (PMLD) where there was a high risk of fatality for many pupils if they were to contract Covid-19, all pupils were provided with a highly innovative home school learning offer. This decision was taken in consultation with the range of medical staff who support these children on a regular basis. This learning offer included a range of materials and equipment being delivered to all pupils, online lessons and therapy sessions being delivered through virtual sessions with the therapists, including advice for movement. This was a highly successful approach enabling these pupils to remain safe and access an individualised educational offer. Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the offer in place from both Special Schools. During the latter part of the lockdown, Treetops School increased the number of pupils attending school directly including using a variable days approach to ensure biosecurity, and Beacon Hill offered targeted in school sessions to pupils who were in need of this.

These approaches were all discussed through with the Local Authority as the situation developed and were reported through the survey and DfE Return. Due to the nature of the offer for Beacon Hill pupils, the school provided an individual report on the offer and update for all pupils on a weekly basis and this was further discussed on a weekly basis with Health and Social care staff to ensure additional support was being provided for families at this time. The approach taken by Thurrock's Special Schools was therefore in line with the DfE advice to ensure that alternative arrangements were co-produced with parents on a case by case basis taking into account individual needs and circumstances specific to the child.

3.4 Mainstream Resource Bases

All pupils attending the Mainstream Resource Bases were able to attend school, however there were some parents who declined this and worked on the virtual offer with these children at home. All Mainstream Bases carefully monitored the engagement of pupils and took steps through home visits or phone calls to ensure pupils were accessing the online learning or were in school.

3.5 Independent Out Borough Schools

All of the out borough schools, for the thirty eight pupils in these, were contacted to identify the support that was in place for these pupils. The schools were asked to report on the way in which the EHCP was being implemented at this time. This information was reviewed by the Local Authority and further contact made if required to clarify the arrangements in place and the effectiveness of these where necessary.

3.6 Education Health and Care Plans Provision

The Coronavirus Act 2020 temporarily amended the absolute duty to make the provision in an EHC plan (section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014) to a 'reasonable endeavours' duty. During the time this was in force, the Local Authority ensured that it was in regular contact with SENCos in Mainstream and Special Schools to ensure that appropriate provision was in place to support pupils with EHC plans, whether they were attending school or accessing education from home. This was carried out through regular ongoing SENCo forums, and workshops supported by a seconded Inspector from Ofsted. This offer of support included a telephone helpline for parents and for school staff; Governor training; support for all ages and examples of reasonable endeavours templates.

Schools sent in a record of the reasonable endeavours for individual children including reference to the contact with parents and these were saved under individual child records. Where there were issues arising from this, the Local Authority addressed the issues with schools and parents to ensure the appropriate level of support was in place.

Where it was identified that pupils required additional IT support, for example laptops for pupils who were working at home and not on a roll of a school, these were provided by the Local Authority to ensure these pupils could access an educational offer. The Local Authority supported Headteachers in accessing the information relevant to obtain further laptops through the central government scheme for additional IT to support home learning and schools reported that they had checked and provided where necessary IT support for vulnerable pupils.

3.7 Health Services Support

The NHS was required to redesign their Health Services and Children's Services were affected through health staff redeployment, parental anxiety of attending Health Services, school closures, staff sickness and a focus on the acute adult response to the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, Thurrock CCG continued to engage and actively participate with the local Thurrock Covid-19 response, working closely with schools, the education department and social care staff within the Local Authority.

The two Special Schools within Thurrock received continued Special School nursing support for all pupils whether they were attending school or remote learning. The specialist school nursing team were instrumental in the mass testing within schools, symptomatic testing and advice and support on aerosol generating procedures and shielding.

3.8 The Covid-19 Children and Young People's work stream for Mid and South Essex, ensured that parents, schools, and staff across education and social care were informed and updated on current national guidance and local strategies in response to the pandemic. The work stream produced a range of resources and communications to both families, schools and GPs to ensure that the health needs of the children and young people are identified and met.

The DCO worked closely with Public Health and schools to ensure they were updated on the current position of health services and provision that has been available. This has proven effective in the development of joint strategies and communication plans to inform the population of Thurrock.

An effective and child centred group of meetings was developed to identify and explore Thurrock's most vulnerable children and to ensure early intervention to families who are struggling to cope during and after the lockdown. Effective communication mechanisms have been implemented to provide early support, this has included reviewing children who are considered clinically extremely vulnerable and balancing the risk between family breakdown and the risk of Covid-19 transmission.

3.9 Emotional Health and Wellbeing

At the start of the lockdown, key packs of information covering a range of areas in relation to the emotional wellbeing of pupils and staff was developed

by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and the School Wellbeing Service (SWS) and sent directly to schools. This was followed up through the termly School Wellbeing Network Meetings, which allowed School Wellbeing Leads to come together on a virtual platform, have access to a range of support information and share the approaches used across schools.

A telephone support line was established for schools to arrange consultations with the EPS and SWS to support both schools and parents who wished to discuss issues in relation to Wellbeing and Mental Health. This telephone line led to both direct support to parents and support activities for staff in school to build their capacity to support children and to meet their individual needs building resilience in schools. There have been reflective sessions for school staff and whole staff support sessions across groups of schools. These have been well received with feedback that they have strengthened their capacity to support with a direct benefit to children and families.

3.10 Emotional Health and Wellbeing

The Local Authority established a joined up approach across the range of services supporting children's mental health involving representatives from our Educational Psychology Service, local CAMHS service known as the Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service (EWMHS), our Mental Health Support Teams, School Wellbeing Services and our Third Sector Services including Open Door, a local counselling and support service. This joined up approach enabled schools to be aware during this time about how they could access different services, and how they worked together. This was achieved through local services meeting together to discuss emerging issues in relation to the pandemic and mental health and attending Network Meetings with schools. There was also a joined up approach to the distribution of advice material and resources to enable schools to access the most relevant and useful material.

3.11 Services for pupils Post 16

The Inspire Careers service carried out a wide range of activities, including virtual reviews and support activities to ensure the continuation of support for Post 16 students. This included flexible availability of staff to work outside normal hours in order to engage with young people. This enabled over 285 virtual Annual Reviews of EHC plans to be supported by these staff between September 2020 and March 2021. Further work in support to these young people included referrals to Youth Team Mentoring; virtual careers interviews; referrals to adult services; new virtual activities such as virtual youth clubs and online sessions; referrals to other support services such as counselling services; and support for home learning.

In order to support pupils to access education, training and employment, the Inspire service has carried out online searching and securing of provision for pupils identified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), securing of equipment in relation to supporting their learning and remote

access to specific careers education information advice and guidance. The service also worked on supporting those in apprenticeships through virtual contact and advice.

All young people with Education Health and Care plans were written to at the beginning of lockdown to show support for their position and to provide specific advice on ensuring those undergoing transitions at Year 11 and 13 had clear access to the next steps and how to seek further support.

'My Choices' Transition Event went live on the 1st December 2020 in collaboration with Thurrock and Southend Council. There were designated areas for Mainstream, SEND students and Parents and pre-recorded videos regarding Preparing for Adulthood, EHCPs and Apprenticeships and reasonable adjustments and a pre-recording looking at the Young Persons strengths. All of these resources are available to access up to one year after the event via Thurrock Opportunities website. Many SEND Young People, from Year 9 upwards, attended and parents. Analytics showed excellent participation from all SEND schools.

3.12 Services for pupils post 16

Four films were produced for the Young People to support their next steps to College as face to face meetings for courses were not allowed to go ahead due to Covid restrictions. This has ensured that SEND students are prepared for courses and the courses they have applied for.

South Essex College and Thurrock Adult Community College have filmed their courses and they are accessible on the Local Offer and have been sent to the colleges to use as they wish.

During lockdown, dedicated Personal Advisors (PA) called all Young People Post 16 with an EHCP. 256 spoke to a PA and the PA recorded all interactions on our data bases. From the data collected, it was apparent that the Young People wanted to engage with other Young People and felt Covid had delayed this.

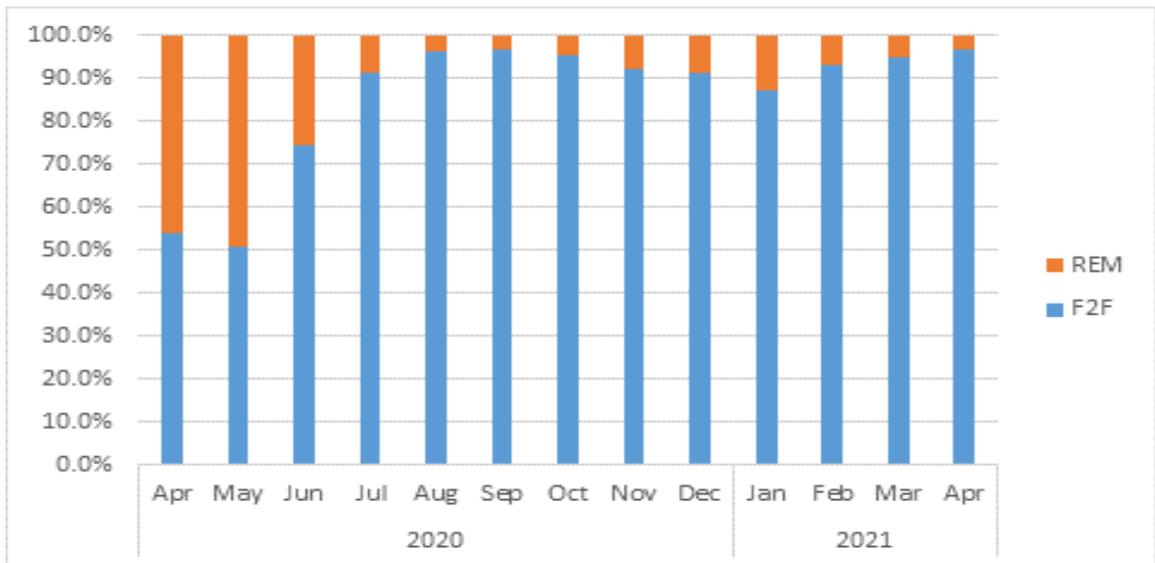
The Youth Team set up a 'Hang Out' SEND Youth Club online which now has progressed to face to face club. It is going from strength to strength and beginning to have regular attendees.

4. Children's Social Care's response to Covid-19:

- 4.1 During the Covid-19 pandemic, Thurrock Children's Social Care has continued to deliver core services to children, young people and their families ensuring children are safeguarded and supported. Our practice has been adapted to ensure the safety and protection of both staff members, children and their families and carers with whom we work.
- 4.2 At the beginning of the pandemic, and in response to the initial national restrictions, we developed a comprehensive guidance document entitled

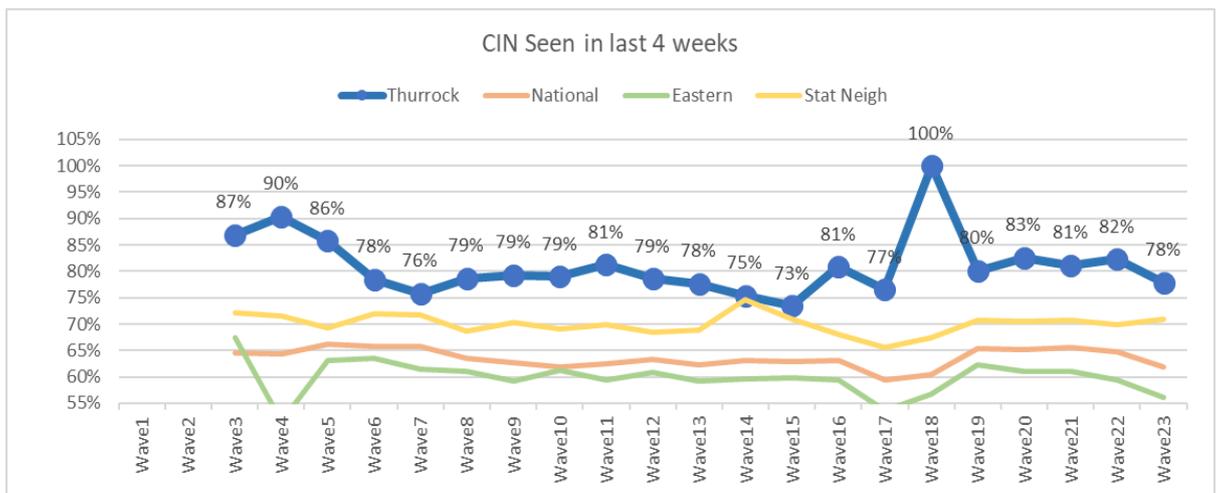
'Operational Procedures during the Coronavirus Outbreak' to inform all of Thurrock Children Services staff of how our working practices would be adapted in response to the pandemic. The Operational Procedures have subsequently been reviewed and updated regularly during the past year, in accordance with emerging Government directions and Public Health advice regarding social distancing and working from home.

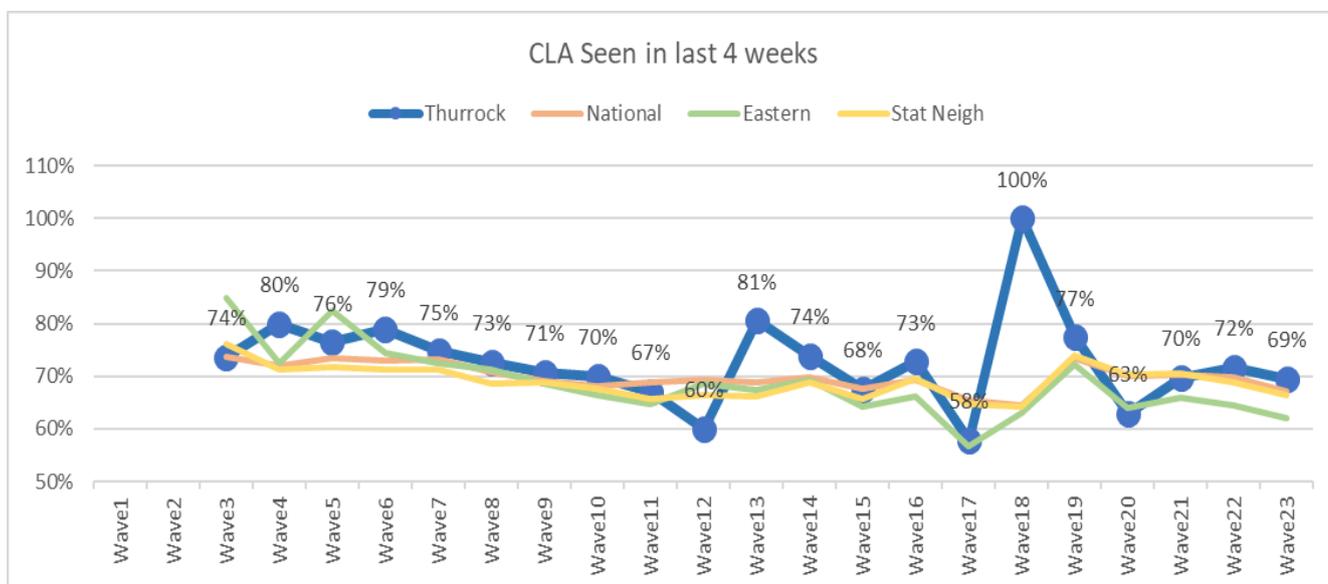
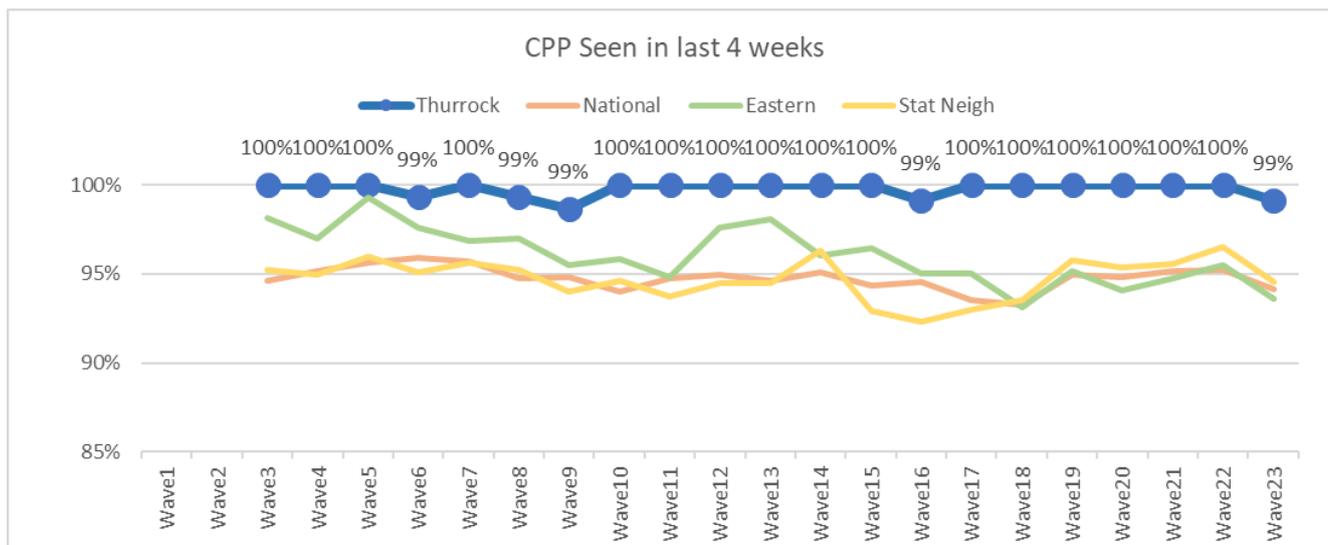
- 4.3 The best way to understand risk, support and protect each child or young person within the context of the Covid-19 restrictions, was to undertake a detailed risk assessment of each child's needs. This assessment was fundamental to determine the method and frequency of visits to children and young people. In developing a Covid-19 Risk Assessment tool, Senior Managers liaised with other Local Authorities in the Eastern Region to consider their approaches to responding to social work practice within the context of the pandemic.
- 4.4 While many of the children known to Thurrock's Children's Social Care had already had a Child and Family Assessment, it was important to understand the current risks in light of the pandemic, and the impact this may pose to the child and their family, such as being isolated, health status, having a limited support network, limited access to school, services and other professional involvement. A significant consideration within the risk assessments was whether the child was attending school and the level of input from the multi-agency network around them.
- 4.5 Covid-19 Risk Assessments were undertaken by practitioners for every child or young person open to Thurrock Children Social Care and Early Help, and a RAG rating was given for each child. Team Managers reviewed each risk assessment and provided management sign-off. Subsequently a Quality Assurance process was implemented to audit approximately a third of all risk assessments, starting with those children deemed to be at highest risk rating. Children at highest risk continued to be visited regularly face-to-face, whereas children rated 'Amber' and 'Green' received virtual visits or in some cases, a blended approach of both face-to-face and virtual. The outcome from the audits confirmed that the RAG ratings were appropriate. In response to the changes made to the way children were seen, a new reporting system was developed and implemented to reflect the method and frequency of visits, enabling managers to have daily oversight of the data. We continue to perform strongly on both visits to children and frequency of visits.
- 4.6 The chart below shows visits to children during the pandemic year, starting with almost 50% of visits in April and May 2020 being remote visits, moving to face to face physical visiting almost exclusively through to April 2021. Social workers and managers are clear that children and young people need to be physically seen in order to effectively safeguard them.



- REM is remote visits and F2F is face to face visits

The three charts below have been taken from the DfE National Wave data returns completed by children’s social care through the pandemic. These charts evidence strong performances for children being seen, against national, statistical neighbours and Eastern Region outturns:





4.7 There have been significant changes in respect to the number of office-based staff working in the Civic Offices, with the majority of staff working virtually from home since the pandemic began. We have maintained a rota of core staff within the office, with strict safety measures in place. Senior Managers have been present in the office, on a rota basis, to provide management support and advice to the workforce. Practitioners and managers have adapted well to working from home and have developed effective and creative ways of keeping in contact and provided much needed support.

4.8 Following the Council fast tracking the ability to work in an agile way, staff have responded very well to new ways of working. Management oversight has continued through virtual catch-ups and team meetings and supervision has taken place both virtually and face-to-face. We have continued to provide a range of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities to the

workforce, with a good in-house weekly programme and commissioned external training where the need has been identified, delivered virtually. The DCS, Assistant Director and Principal Social Worker have continued to facilitate virtual monthly forum meetings with practitioners to receive feedback and discuss any emerging issues. These have been well-received and feedback has been positive.

- 4.9 Early in the pandemic PPE was supplied for practitioners to use when undertaking visits or meeting with families. A good supply has been maintained throughout the pandemic and staff have been provided with clear guidance on how to obtain, use and safely dispose of PPE. All front-line staff in Children's Social Care and Early Help, and Foster Carers, were offered the opportunity to have a Covid-19 vaccination as soon as these became available. It was recognised that in order to maintain a good level of placement availability and stability for Looked-After children, foster carers should be prioritised for vaccination and we have since received positive feedback from foster carers thanking us and expressing they felt valued as a result.

5. Children Looked After – Local Authority Duties

- 5.1 On the 24th April 2020 the government temporarily amended our regulated duties to Looked After Children via the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 which reduced our obligations in a number of areas. The full regulations can be found here: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/445/contents/made>
- 5.2 Local Authorities have a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of any child that it looks after under Section 22(3) of the Children Act 1989 and it must have regard to the Corporate Parenting Principles in Section 1(1) of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The Local Authority has further duties under the Children Act 1989 to provide advice and assistance to care leavers which includes undertaking assessment of needs and completing a pathway plan. Further detail on the content of these is found in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. These duties have remained in place save that the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 which allowed some changes to the visiting and review requirements for Looked after Children. These regulations have been amended by the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2021.
- 5.3 Officers considered the implications of these changes, consulted with legal, and regionally and nationally with other Local Authorities. The amendments were because of an envisaged depletion in the workforce due to Covid-19 which was not realised in Thurrock. The approach taken by Thurrock was that we would only make use of the amendments where the normal practice standards were not practicable or enforceable and that we would not relax timescales without approval at a Strategic level on a case-by-case basis.

- 5.4 Guidance was provided to Social Workers and Personal Advisors identifying steps to be taken to minimise risk to Children, Young People and Social Workers, Foster Carers and others involved in the care arrangements for our Children and Young People. This has been informed by Government guidance and focused on social distancing techniques upon entering and leaving family homes or placements.

6. Fostering Service

The Fostering Service reviewed its practice in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Government's guidance to remain at home. Foster families, like many families, faced the challenges of living together without the usual opportunities to get out, access services and enjoy the usual routines of family life. Our approach has been to seek to provide services as usual to Foster Carers who continue to care for children during the pandemic.

7. Planning including multi-agency meetings

The use of technology supported Social Workers to ensure that meetings such as Child Looked After reviews and Strategy Meetings. This means that professionals working with Children, including Social Workers, education, care providers, health, youth offending and the Virtual School, are able to contribute to planning and provision of services.

Multi-agency meetings such as Strategy Meetings, Child Protection Conferences and Looked-After Reviews have been held virtually throughout the pandemic. As national restrictions have allowed, there have been some hybrid meetings, with some attendees in the office, joined virtually by other members of the professional network. There has been a rapid roll-out of IT enhancements to support this change to our working practices. There have been positives in the new ways of working in terms of better attendance from all agencies at meetings and some young people have really benefited from virtual communication.

8. Supporting family contact

The Oaktree Contact Centre was initially closed in order to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection and remote contact initially offered. Where there were particular difficulties with virtual contact, which might impact on their attachment, in particular for babies there was some provision for face-to-face contact. The decision to facilitate any face-to face contact was made on a case-by-case basis and subject to a risk assessment

We have continued to prioritise contact between children in care and their birth parents. We have adopted a blended approach to contact with children under the age of three being prioritised for face-to-face contact. Our contact centre, Oaktree increased the level of face-to-face contact over the course of the pandemic, while adhering to all the government advice regarding safety

measures. Contact for older children has been facilitated virtually and in the community, as the weather has allowed.

9. Supporting the understanding of Children and Young People of Covid-19

Literature was initially distributed to Carers to help them to explain the pandemic to Children and Young People in child friendly language without raising their anxieties. This was reinforced by conversations between Social Workers and care providers who are supporting Children and Young People to understand the pandemic, the risks, and what this means for them. This was particularly important with older Children and Young Adults who may be more at risk if they were leaving their placement/home to visit family or friends.

10. Supporting the Court Process

The service has worked closely with our legal team and the courts to ensure that court proceedings continue to progress permanency plans for Children, with minimal delay. Senior Managers and Legal Services have been in close communication with the Designated Family Judge of the Local Family Courts in order to ensure an effective response to the changing situation on behalf of both the Courts and the Local Authority. Hearings were initially held remotely where possible and families assisted to participate in the Court Process through the provision of access to Information Technology. This has now moved to a hybrid approach.

11. Supporting Education and Employment

11.1 The looked after children Virtual School has worked closely with Social Workers and Foster Carers to make sure that the educational needs of our Children and Young People are being met. This has included clear guidance from the Virtual Head Teacher in relation to school attendance, additional equipment needed or specific support to support continued learning. To support education and to enable Young People to access e-learning, laptops were initially purchased for Young People by Children's Social Care and then additional capacity was provided through a Government initiative to support vulnerable Young People during Covid-19.

11.2 Throughout the pandemic there has been good and effective communication between Children's Social Care and the schools in Thurrock in respect of vulnerable children. There have been several months in which schools have been working with limited capacity, due to the national restrictions. The government's guidance made provision for vulnerable children, such as children with an allocated Social Worker, to continue to physically access school, although at times there was a limited take-up by parents.

11.3 Social Workers have encouraged parents and carers to continue to send vulnerable children to school, as we recognise school offers a protective

factor for children, and our local schools provide approximately a third of referrals to Thurrock's Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). During the past year, we have developed a Single Point of Contact for schools to report any concerns for children's welfare. We have worked closely with schools to share information, including Covid-19 Risk Assessments, ensuring a joined-up process for supporting vulnerable children and their families and monitoring school attendance. We have collaborated with local schools to identify children and families in need and to provide laptops, school meals and food parcels where necessary. Free school meals were provided for those eligible throughout the school holiday periods up to and including Easter.

- 11.4 The Corporate Director and Assistant Directors for Children's Social Care and Education have attended weekly meetings with CEOs of the Academy Trusts and the Leader of the Primary and Secondary forums, to discuss any emerging trends and ensure effective communication between schools and Children's Social Care.

12. Care Leavers

- 12.1 The Aftercare Service has maintained good communication with care leavers to limit their isolation and provide practical and emotional support. The service has provided financial support to the young people, based upon their personal circumstances, with additional financial support made available in early 2021 from the Covid Winter Grant. This has supported 275 young people with food and utility costs. Care leavers have also been provided with laptops to ensure they have been able to communicate through the pandemic.
- 12.2 Online training and virtual support for Care Leavers has been key through Covid-19. The Aftercare Service has strived to 'Keep in Touch' regularly with all Care Leavers to reduce isolation during the pandemic, using the young person's preferred communication method.
- 12.3 During the past year Education, Employment and Training (EET) figures for Care Leavers have been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2021, 45% of the Care Leavers aged 16 to 21 year old were in part or full time education, employment or training compared to 62% in March 2020. There are bi-monthly panels which focus on pre and post 18 year olds who do not have an EET offer. The panel seeks to strengthen oversight and planning; to understand the issues for individual young people and align their interests to an EET offer.
- 12.4 To further mitigate the impact of Covid-19, weekly workshops at Inspire youth hub have been run to support with writing a CV and preparation for interviews, applying for university and short courses to improve employability. Personal Advisors have liaised with colleges and universities to gain a clear update of what Care Leavers required to continue their studies. Personal Advisors also continued to support Care Leavers with applying for college/university placements and financial support for courses

12.5 The Aftercare Team have also worked closely with Headstart Housing to ensure that any housing or tenancy related difficulties were identified and addressed. Advisors have also continued to support Care Leavers in liaising with the Housing Department. The After Care Service has also provided Care Leavers with support in claiming benefits and support to ensure that they do not get into debt or be at risk of losing their homes.

13. Future planning in relation to Covid-19:

13.1 During the pandemic we have taken an adaptive, yet robust, approach to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children, young people and our workforce. There is a collective confidence in the actions taken by Children's Social Care and Education to safeguard and support children and young people of Thurrock during the pandemic.

13.2 Undoubtedly the past year has presented a number of challenges which will have far-reaching future implications in the medium and long term. We anticipate that the impact of the pandemic on children and families will lead to increased levels of need. It is likely that there will be increased numbers of families living in poverty due to the economic impact of the pandemic, and increased need and risk due to mental illness, substance misuse, domestic abuse and homelessness. Currently we are experiencing a number of families being placed in Thurrock from a number of London Boroughs, as Thurrock's housing is more affordable.

13.3 We have developed a Roadmap detailing how the service will evolve in the next six to twelve months, subject to the trajectory of the pandemic and any further national restrictions. Thurrock's roadmap has evaluated the positive impact of the pandemic, and the opportunities this has presented, to change the way we practice and to deliver services in the future. An example of this is using technology more widely, and taking a blended (hybrid) approach to holding meetings, with partners attending both face to face and virtually. We have promoted agile working within the service and have embraced the philosophy that work is a thing you do, rather than a place you go. Our roadmap will analyse the change in demand upon the service, both volume and characteristics, with our partner agencies and local families. This will enable the service to respond quickly to change and to identify themes as they emerge.

14. Summary

14.1 The information contained in this report demonstrates a high level of activity to ensure that Children and Young People are safeguarded, plans are made for their future and that they have had continued access to support in relation to their need including the educational health and care needs identified within their Education Health and Care Plans.

14.2 Like all Children and Young People, there are clearly impacts on the learning and development as a consequence of the arrangements that have been in

pace to counter the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, however the support and engagement of children, young people and families has been carefully monitored and the longer term impact on their learning and development will continue to be a priority for all services across the local area.

- 14.3 There are clear variations emerging across groups of Children and Young People as to the extent of the impact of these arrangements with some children predicted to make good progress back to their expected levels of progress and some positive reports on the use of virtual learning on the engagement of certain pupil groups. The Local Authority will continue to work closely with schools and providers to ensure that emerging from the pandemic arrangements, the progress and opportunities for pupils with SEND are closely monitored and supported to enable them to have the best possible outcomes.
- 14.4 The most significant challenge for Children's Social Care, and for the children, young people and families we work with, has been the global pandemic during 2020/21. This has required us to be creative and adaptive in our working practices, in order to ensure children and families have been supported and safeguarded in these difficult circumstances. The service responded quickly and in a child focussed way that ensured children, young people and their families continued to receive a strong service during this past year.

15. Reasons for Recommendation

This report gives an overview of the Covid-19 support and response in Thurrock, and is provided as information for members who may be new to the Committee.

16. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

None

17. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

None.

18. Implications

18.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

Additional funding has been provided to schools from the government to support during the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools were able to access IT

equipment to support children and young people with an online learning offer. Additional funding has been provided to support with summer schools and the impact of this will be reviewed in the autumn term.

18.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

The Local Authority is subject to all the normal legal duties to vulnerable children and young people under a range of legislation including the Children Act 1989 and Children and Families Act 2014. The Coronavirus Act 2020 allowed some relaxation to the duties placed on the Local Authorities. This Act expires 2 years from 25th March 2020 unless otherwise extended. The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 were made under the 2020 Act and were amended later in 2020. The current regulations are the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 which extend the existing flexibilities in the primary duties until 30th September 2021.

18.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

Thurrock has a strong partnership approach with schools and local communities and this has ensured that children and young people can access an educational offer. We have seen a significant focus on vulnerable groups recognising that the attainment gap for children and young people who are disadvantaged is more evident. Working closely with our schools we will continue to monitor these children and young people to ensure that we continue to reduce the attainment gap.

Our approach ensures the safety and wellbeing of children, young people and our workforce, this includes action taken during the pandemic. This report demonstrates the action taken to ensure that Children and Young People are safeguarded and that they have continued access to support in relation to their needs. We will continue to work closely with schools and providers to ensure that emerging from the pandemic arrangements, the progress and opportunities for pupils with SEND are closely monitored and supported to enable them to have the best possible outcomes.

18.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

None

19. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

20. Appendices to the report

None.

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